Abstract

The paper reviews the use of systemic approaches in tourism planning from the perspective of the opposite procedural and substantive standpoints in planning theory. Assumptions of rationality, linearity and generalizability are described from the point of view of the systemic theories that underpinned them and how these criticisms can be overcame through non-linear systemic theories. A methodology supported in complexity theory and critical realism is suggested in order to explore the complementarity between substantive and procedural planning.
Introduction

The systems view is considered one of the most widely accepted paradigms in tourism research (Panosso-Netto 2009) and ‘one of the main theoretical constructs which underlies the developing sustainable approach towards tourism planning’ (Hall, 2008: 70). A way to understand early systemic models to plan tourism would be through the point of view of an enduring dichotomy in planning theory: substantive versus procedural planning (Fainstein, 2000). The former focuses on what is being planned, while the latter is related to the planning process (Faludi, 1973). The differentiation between substantive and procedural planning can be used to understand key features of systemic tourism models by their focus either on the tourism system, or the planning system. The paper explores traditional systemic approaches for tourism planning from procedural and substantive standpoints. It is suggested that the complementarity of both standpoints could be explored through a methodology supported on critical realism and complexity.

Systems in tourism planning

Tourism systems with a procedural planning approach originated mainly from cybernetics. The focal point in cybernetic systems was to improve the planning processes in order to achieve desired outcomes (Wiener, 1954; McLoughlin, 1969). In cybernetic tourism systems, the role of the public sector was central: ‘planning is an official process with promotional, controlling and monitoring roles’ (Baud-Bovy & Lawson, 1998: 160). The better the planning process, the better the outcomes (Getz, 1986). The planning process was considered a ‘parallel system’ (Hall, 1989: 277) acting upon the tourism system in an alternate state of action and goal revision that understood planning as a linear process of cause and effect (McLoughlin, 1969). Placing planning outside the complexities of the tourism system avoided subjectivities, stressing the rationality of the process (Hall, 2008: 71).

Substantive approaches on the other hand were endogenous and focused on the function each one of the internal components had to perform to make the system work (Jackson, 2000). Substantive systems were related to organicism-based General Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1950; Ackoff 1995), which when applied to tourism planning, implied that tourism ‘cannot function properly unless each part is doing its work most efficiently and in close harmony with all other parts’ (Gunn, 1997). The understanding of the role of each component and its relation to the whole was key for tourism planning (Gunn & Var, 2002; Hall, 2005; Leiper, 1979; Mill & Morrison, 2002). Leiper's (1979) system for example, was not structured from the particular point of view of any element. Instead, he targeted the understanding of the whole in order to provide governments ‘with a value-free approach to tourism policy’ (Leiper, 1979: 405).

Early systemic approaches for planning have been criticised, among other things, for the resemblance of planning systems to mechanisms of social control (Yiftachel, 1998), for their rational, value-free approach that overlooked context and political conflict (Fainstein, 2000), and for failing to cope with contingency. Indeed, authors like McKercher (1999), Farrell & Twining-Ward (2004) and Stevenson Et al. (2009) have reflected upon the rigidity of earlier systemic models which, when matched with linear standpoints, sought to universalise tourism planning principles and methodologies while often forgetting the local characteristics of what was being planned. These authors suggested that complexity could challenge the assumptions of previous systemic approaches in relation to linearity, context and individual interests. Indeed, complexity theory can support the reconsideration of the role of the public sector as the sole player exerting control over the tourism system (McKercher,
allowing us to consider ‘the disorder arising from interaction, competition and human agency on the policy process’ (Stevenson, Airey, & Miller, 2009). Within complexity, dynamics of local collaboration, adaptation and self-organisation can be acknowledged as steering efforts (Plummer & Fennell, 2009; M. G. Reed, 1999; Stevenson et al., 2009; Zahra & Ryan, 2007) recognising the shifting tendency from government-led tourism planning to new ways of social tourism governance (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011).

The research problem

Traditional systemic approaches have been widely applied in the Santa Elena province, Ecuador, through formal planning processes mainly led by the public sector (Mintur, 2007; Senplades, 2008; Nobis, 2009; Gobierno Provincial de Santa Elena, 2011). While successful in delivering strategic plans, formal planning processes had serious problems in their implementation stage, which in most cases did not even start (Nobis, 2009). In the meantime, a social group emerged from the joint initiative of public and private tourism stakeholders. Early pilot interviews suggested that this self-organised group responds to a local need of dealing with political instability and promoting coordinated ways of decision-making.

In this research, the tourism destination is considered a social complex system composed by interrelated stakeholders (Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008) that provides the context for self-organisation. The group is understood as both a self-organised social structure that emerged from individual dynamics in the tourism system, and as an informal planning system that co-steers the destination through joint mechanisms of decision-making and action. These assumptions suggest that the gap between what is being planned and the planning process could be bridged. This interplay is precisely our case study:

↓ How are these social processes of self-organisation related to the wider tourism system?
↓ How, and to what extent, are these social processes of self-organisation related to formal tourism planning processes?
↓ What can the planning processes in the Santa Elena province tell us about the usefulness of complexity theory to explain non-linear forms of planning?

Critical realism as the worldview

Critical realism seems appropriate for the study of social complex systems (Byrne, 1998; Harvey & Reed, 1997; Jorg, 2011). This philosophical position has been seen as the bridge between positivism and interpretivism. It assumes that social phenomena exist independently of people’s perceptions, yet the only way to gain knowledge is by interpreting these social perceptions and then explaining the dynamics that produce them (Harvey & Reed, 1997; Sayer, 2000).

Critical realism supports the idea of a time- and context-dependent multi-layered reality that stands out against to ‘flat ontologies’ (Sayer, 2000: 12) of other philosophical stances. The methodological implications of the combination of critical realism with social systemism (Bunge, 2000) are that both methodological individualism and collectivism need to be discarded while different levels of analysis are needed (Bhaskar, 2008). Danermark et al. (2002) emphasised that methods to study a stratified reality should be innovative and able to highlight intentionality, emergence, open systems and dynamics, while acknowledging the impossibility of social prediction.
**How to study self-organisation in a complex tourism system**

A single embedded case study addresses both the social dynamics in the wider tourism system and the individual perceptions that led to local self-organisation in Santa Elena. In order to tackle individual and social aspects, the research focuses on three layers of analysis, each one involving different methods of data collection and interpretation:

1. **LAYER 1: TOURISM SYSTEM** (tourism stakeholders). Helpful to address breadth and context, oriented to the study interrelations, structure and social organisations. Methods: social survey, descriptive statistics, mapping of social networks.

2. **LAYER 2: PLANNING SYSTEM** (public documents). Addresses the official understanding of formal and informal planning efforts and serves as a mechanism of data triangulation. Methods: qualitative document analysis.

3. **LAYER 3: INDIVIDUALS** (key stakeholders). Focused on the in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the case through the roles, intentions and perceptions of the main social actors. Methods: semi structured interviews, qualitative bottom-up analysis.

A qualitative final explanation would attempt reconciliation between layers, while benefiting from the rich language complexity offers for the explanation of social phenomena.

**Final considerations**

The research design itself is the emergent result of the non-linear and multi-layered interplay between critical realism as the philosophical position, complexity as the theoretical framework, the case study as the research strategy, and the perceived phenomena of the real world. The proposed methodology will allow the researcher to investigate the interplay between planning processes led by interrelated individual actors and the broader tourism system as a social totality, by addressing their dynamics and emergent properties in a contextualised setting.

**Bibliography**


